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DEPARTMENT FOR PA, NEA/ARN, INR/IC/CD, INR/S:STHIBEAULT AND
JMCCARTER, VOA NEWS CA, NEA/PPD:CBOURGEOIS, DBENZE AND AFERNANDEZ,
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SUBJECT: Damascus Media Reaction: Syria/UAE, Syria/Iraq, Golan,
Calls for Peace/Dialogue with Syria, Lebanon, Palestinian
Territories (11/20)

11. Summary: Syrian papers today reported that President Asad received on Sunday (Nov. 19) a letter from Sheikh Khalifa bin Zaid Al Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates, concerning bilateral relations. The letter was delivered by the UAE Ambassador in Damascus Yousef al-Medfaei.

On Syrian-Iraqi relations, papers reported that Syrian FM Walid al-Mouallem started a visit to Baghdad yesterday (Nov. 19), which is the first of its kind since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Al-Mouallem held talks with Iraqi President Talabani, Iraqi PM al-Maliki, and Iraqi FM Zebari, as well as other officials. The talks focused on the latest developments in Iraq and the region. In a joint press conference with Iraqi FM Zebari, Al-Mouallem said that Syria "supports the political process, the Iraqi government, and efforts to achieve national reconciliation." He added that Syria cares about Iraq because security in the two countries cannot be separated. "We repeat our condemnation of all terrorist acts," he said. "We support the elected government and national reconciliation....We support the unity of Iraq, and we think that a timetable for pulling U.S. occupation forces out of Iraq will reduce violence in Iraq." Syrian sources had expected that the ministers would announce resumption of diplomatic ties, but that did not happen. Al-Mouallem's visit concurred with calls by UK PM Tony Blair and former US Secretary of State James Baker for talks with Syria and Iran to improve the situation in Iraq. However, Syrian sources said that the visit was not meant to satisfy anybody, but came out of a Syrian desire to increase cooperation between the two countries. Al-Mouallem said that setting a timetable to withdraw U.S. troops "will contribute to limiting violence." Zebari said the sides discussed re-establishing diplomatic ties, which were cut in 11982. No certain time was given for this, however.

End of summary.

12. Selected Headlines:

"President Asad receives a letter from Sheikh Khalifa Bib Zayed Al-Nahyan, President of the United Arab Emirates, on bilateral relations" (Government-owned Tishreen, 11/20)

"Foreign Minister al-Mouallem carries a message of amity from Damascus to Baghdad: We didn't come to gratify any one.... Syria is dedicated to the Iraqi people's concerns.... Setting a timetable for withdrawal of US troops from Iraq will contribute to the achievement of stability.... Zebari: The visit paves the way for good relations between the two countries" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 11/20)

"Deputy Foreign Minister Miqdad receives a delegation of the UN Fact Finding Commission on the Golan: Syria is determined to regain her occupied land by all possible means" (Government-owned Tishreen, 11/20)

"More US Congressmen call for dialogue with Syria. Prodi reiterates the importance of achieving peace in the region" (Government-owned Tishreen, 11/20)

"British 'The Independent' daily: Seeking Syria's and Iran's help to get out of the Iraqi impasse is London's and Washington's top priority" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 11/20)

"Nasrallah, Hizbollah Chief, reiterates call to form a national unity government or hold early parliamentary elections. Nasrallah's new promise: Toppling the Feltman government" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 11/20)

"The Olmert government considers the UN General Assembly's resolutions denouncing the Bait Hanoun massacre as hypocrisy! More than two Palestinians martyred, eight injured by the continuing Israeli aggression against Gaza" (Government-owned Tishreen, 11/20)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"Candles of Peace"

Abd-al-Fattah al-Awad, Chief Editor of government-owned Al-Thawra, maintained (11/20): "Israel and the party that supports it are neither willing nor able to achieve peace in the Middle East.... Israel quickly rejected the Spanish peace initiative....

"All of this is happening in the absence of a supportive US role for the Middle East peace process.... The US has chosen to be an unfair and biased sponsor of the peace process....

"There is confusion in the statements of US officials concerning dialogue with Syria. This is evidence of American disinterest in peace.... Sometimes you hear one person calling for dialogue, another denying and rejecting it, and a third setting conditions. Perhaps you can hear these conflicting statements from the same official over a short period of time!

"It does not take much effort to explain this. This is not only the confusion that follows the difficult problems that the Bush administration is facing. It is also an attempt to contain the repercussions of the Republicans' loss, which was a result of American policies in the region....

"If Syria believes in and always calls for dialogue, it does not believe that dialogue for the sake of dialogue is the goal that everyone seeks. Though important and significant, dialogue is not an end in and of itself. In order not to be misunderstood, it is important to stress the need for dialogue, but the dialogue must have an objective. The time of diktat has passed. The right and useful dialogue is the one that respects 'common interests', the sacred term in the language of politics....

"Syria never talked about conditions for dialogue, but it always insists that Syrian national and pan-Arab interests must be taken into consideration. These interests focus on peace as a noble objective that returns rights to their owners and paints a new future for the region."

"After US Failures"

Izz-al-Din al-Darwish, an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, wrote (11/20): "Europe is dissociating itself from the United States as a direct result of the deception that the Bush administration practiced and of the haughtiness it adopted in its foreign policy, and, then, of the humiliating failure it reaped as a result of these positions, especially in the Arab region...."

"Europe is now formulating new positions, especially with regard to the war on Iraq and the Arab-Israeli conflict.... The European moves toward the region and Syria in particular are part of these new European policies...."

"Influential European countries like Spain, Italy, Belgium, and Norway responded to the somewhat timid position of the British Government toward Syria when they stressed the importance of Syria's role and the need to coordinate with Syria as an indispensable party if security and stability were to prevail in the region and if the peace process were to take its full course...."

"Some European countries did their part. They sent envoys to Syria, learned its positions, asked its opinion, and expressed willingness to continue contacts with it. Others are awaiting more American failures to make similar contacts. But in any case, it can be stressed here that Syria has adhered to its policy. It did not give in to pressure or bow to the despotism of the American adventurism that was led by President Bush and his neoconservative team, and which has been defeated at home and abroad...."

"This, naturally, does not mean that things have reached a point where Syria can feel reassured and non-skeptical, especially since the US Administration has not yet stopped its campaign against Syria or abandoned accusations against it. American officials do not cease slandering Syria, and their insolence sometimes reaches the point of blaming Syria for all the problems of the region, although everyone in the region and beyond realizes and knows with certainty that the region is experiencing occupations, killings, and terrorism because of Washington's wars and unlimited support for Israel, the head of terror. American officials, from the president down to the most junior White House employee, know this fact, but they insist on ignoring it for Zionist reasons, the most important of which is that most of them are more loyal to Israel than to their own country, the United States."

"Europe Anew"

Ahmad Dawwa, a commentator in government-owned Al-Thawrah, said (11/20): "It is not surprising that Israel rejected the European peace initiative. What is surprising is that this swift rejection passes without comment or query from the international community.... We wonder how the world would react if the Palestinians were the party that rejected the peace plan."

"The European effort to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict is an important step, but it needs support in order to produce the required result. Had Israel thought its rejection of the Spanish, Italian, and French initiative would result in penalties, it would not have taken such a step, or at least it would have asked the three countries about the content of the initiative and the way to deal with it...."

"If Europeans want to make a difference, they need to change their political performance and move from the role of a financier to the role of direct contributor to peacemaking...."

Corbin